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INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS PRIORITY

RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA PRIORITY 7848

RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL PRIORITY 3803

RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 5050

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 9949

RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON PRIORITY 1910

RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 005555

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DEPT FOR EAP/MLS, NSC FOR PHU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/25/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL KDEM TH

SUBJECT: NO PLANS FOR COMPREHENSIVE THAI ELECTION MONITORING

REF: A. BANGKOK 4687 (EU OBSERVER SPAT)

1B. BANGKOK 5332 (ELECTION CLOCK TICKING)

Classified By: Political Counselor Susan M. Sutton, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) The decision by a prominent Thai poll monitoring organization and the European Union to not deploy observers for Thailand's upcoming December 23 general elections leaves a dearth of objective election monitors for Thailand's first election following the September 2006 coup d'etat. While the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) plans to partner with at least 100 NGOs to supplement its own monitoring efforts, some doubt these groups can provide effective and unbiased observations. Small groups of observers from international NGOs, other countries, and Embassy Bangkok and ConGen Chiang Mai may well be the most credible observers on the ground during the election. The absence of objective local monitors may provide an opportunity for political actors to further their own ends by accusing the government of election fraud or manipulation. End summary.

POLLWATCH TO GO IT ALONE

12. (SBU) Pollwatch/P-Net, a prominent Thai NGO that has monitored many previous Thai elections, announced in October that it will sever ties with the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) following a public spat with the ECT. On September 10, ECT Commissioner Sodsri accused Pollwatch of not properly accounting for 80 million baht (\$2.4 million) allocated to Pollwatch to monitor the 2006 general elections.

Pollwatch officials took umbrage to Sodsri's comments, denied her accusations, and demanded a letter of apology from the ECT. After an apology letter was not forthcoming, Pollwatch announced that it would not accept ECT funds to monitor the upcoming election and that it would boycott any meetings between the ECT and independent election monitoring organizations.

13. (C) Pollwatch's refusal to accept ECT funds casts doubt on its ability to provide comprehensive, nation-wide election monitoring. In an October 11 meeting with us, Pollwatch officials indicated they had essentially written off election monitoring on any significant scale, and that they have made no plans to seek alternative funding sources. Pollwatch added that volunteers would provide unofficial monitoring in

a few select areas, and that the organization would "continue their whistle-blowing role" by publicly commenting on the freeness and fairness of the election. However, without election observers on the ground throughout the country, it is unlikely that Pollwatch will be able to provide a reliable account of election fraud or nefarious election-related activity.

ELECTION COMMISSION RECRUITS OTHER PARTNERS

¶ 14. (SBU) The ECT has proceeded with plans to partner with dozens of other Thai-based NGOs and private organizations to monitor the election. The ECT has traditionally provided this type of support as a means of augmenting the ECT's own monitoring activities. These NGOs constitute a broad range of Thai civil-society, including groups like fraternal organizations, local teacher associations, and community activists. Many of these groups may not necessarily have prior experience with election monitoring.

¶ 15. (C) According to ECT officials, the ECT will provide the bulk of its monitoring funds to approximately nine NGOs considered "top-tier" organizations that have a regional or national reach. As many as 100 other "second-tier" organizations operating on the local level will receive the remainder of the funds. An ECT official told us on October 25 that the ECT expects to budget at least 50 million baht to support the monitoring activities of these NGOs.

¶ 16. (C) Pollwatch officials conceded to us on October 11 that they expect these groups to form the bulk of Thai civil society election monitoring efforts. Pollwatch openly questioned the ability of these groups to provide credible

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monitoring given their lack of experience. As most will rely completely on ECT funding, these organizations will also be open to accusations of bias. (Note: Many officials of the pro-Thaksin People's Power Party have warned us they expect the ECT to be biased against them. End Note.)

EU CANCELS MONITORING PLANS

¶ 17. (SBU) The EU Political Counselor told us on October 16 that the EU has canceled plans to send an election monitoring team to Thailand, following a public spat in August when the ECT refused to sign a memorandum of understanding with the EU (reftel A). Many in the RTG felt the EU proposal to send 150 observers went considerably beyond "observing" to providing technical assistance which was not needed and which would have reportedly restricted the government's freedom to oversee its own elections. The EU representative added that it was still unclear if the Embassies of EU member states in Thailand would deploy their own election observation teams.

ANFREL STEPS INTO THE GAP

¶ 18. (SBU) The Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) is thus far the largest international NGO to have announced plans to deploy election monitors. ANFREL plans to partner with locally-based human rights NGOs, such as Forum-Asia and the Asian Institute for Human Rights, to deploy 16 monitoring teams to provinces with a history of previous election violence or irregularities. An ANFREL official told us recently that ANFREL will attempt to recruit third-country nationals to serve as observers, and that ANFREL plans to fund this program partially through a grant from the National Endowment for Democracy. The Canadian Embassy and the Asia Foundation (TAF) have also announced plans to fund a two-day ANFREL workshop that will train election observers in 14 southern, predominantly Muslim provinces.

¶ 19. (C) While ANFREL's involvement augments the monitoring

effort, its strong statements against the September 2006 coup may open the organization to criticism that it is not entirely above the political fray. Additionally, it is unlikely 16 teams will be able to have much of an impact in a nationwide election, and there is a risk that ANFREL's report will be negatively biased, as the organization will only field their teams in problematic regions.

USG ELECTION MONITORING

¶10. (SBU) While there are no known U.S.-based NGOs planning to deploy election monitors, USG-funded IFES, TAF, and the National Democratic Institute plan to work with civil society groups in the country to promote a free and fair election. IFES and NDI have been sponsoring a series of seminars to educate local elites and political parties on recently passed election laws, and some are also working with local organizations to educate the public on new election registration procedures and the harmful effects of vote buying.

¶11. (C) As in previous elections and the August 19 constitutional referendum, Embassy Bangkok and ConGen Chiang Mai plan to deploy at least a dozen monitoring teams throughout the country for the December 23 election. We plan to coordinate our efforts whenever possible with ANFREL, other independent organizations, and other embassies, such as the Australian or Canadian embassies, that may also field monitors, so as not to duplicate efforts. Although by no means comprehensive, the combined efforts of the Embassy, ConGen Chiang Mai, and other international observers should provide a general impression of the overall atmosphere on election day.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) Thailand's geography makes comprehensive nationwide election monitoring an expensive proposition, and not many local organizations are properly equipped to take on the task. The expected absence of Pollwatch and EU monitors will leave few objective poll monitors on the ground for the upcoming election. A dearth of objective, locally-respected,

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independent poll monitors will leave the government open to post-election accusations of manipulation that, whether accurate or not, cannot be easily adjudicated. In such an environment, it will be possible for political actors to further their own ends by publicly claiming that the election was unfair, possibly contributing to political instability after the election.

BOYCE